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The Uncanny Mother in Edna O'Brien's "Cords", "A Rose in the Heart" and "Sister Imelda"

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Abstract:

This essay examines the issue of a dual nature of mother and mother-daughter relationship in Edna O'Brien's "Cords" (1968), "A Rose in the Heart" (1978) and "Sister Imelda" (1981). O'Brien's mother-daughter scenario uncovers a distressing picture of a dilemma between mother and daughter concerning intimacy and separation or oneness and individuation. The 'phantomic' presence of a mother/maternal figure in three stories serves as, paradoxically, a source of both empowerment and disempowerment resulting from women's role of subservience under patriarchy. As identified by Heather Ingman or Helen Thompson, an approach to evaluating women's psychological developmental process may be useful in this respect to illuminate such problematic mother-daughter complex in a motif presented with O'Brien's typical negative narrative of domestic romance. This familiar yet alien, the Freudian uncanny, metaphoric mother appears powerless yet monstrous to the daughter who has attempted every effort to bury alive the ghosts in the past memories intertwined with this mother in her struggle towards individuation. The dual conflicting image of a loving and devouring mother is perhaps associated with an inherent culture of women's abjection and individuation under patriarchy in western society.

Keywords: Abjection, Devouring mother, Edna O'Brien, Mother and daughter, Uncanny

1. Introduction

Edna O'Brien's mother-daughter narrative, like many of twentieth-century Irish women's writings dealing with this theme, focuses on the apparent ambivalence of the bond between women as an outcome of specific character-

istics of the contemporary Irish domestic context. Heather Ingman has identified Julia Kristeva's concept of a preoedipal identification involving "maternal abjection", as a potentially useful theoretical framework against which to seek to understand the generally negative representations of mother-daughter stories produced by modern Irish women writers (Ingman 2007, 69). This mother-daughter motif may also be considered against the identification by André Green of what he termed the "dead mother complex", the one linked to a traumatic experience of an emotionally distant (or, dead, in Green's term) mother in childhood (Thompson 2010, 33). O'Brien illustrates a powerful and also terrible mother figure in these three stories – "Cords" (1968), "A Rose in the Heart" (1978) and "Sister Imelda" (1981), in which a *ghost* mother is omnipresent throughout the whole plot¹. Each of these three stories centres around the daughter's friction with the mother which, for one or other reason, is triggered by an ambivalence towards her emotional dependence upon and separation from the mother. O'Brien's mother in these stories is an uncanny figure, a ghostly reminder whose presence or reappearance triggers buried memories of a dismal past². O'Brien seems to have a preference for themes which explore in a tragic way the impact of a daughter's separation and alienation from her mother, which demonstrate the incapacity of the daughter to escape definitively from an internal prison created by her past, symbolised by the omnipotent mother who is, in some way, always with and within her.

Helen Thompson has pointed out Edna O'Brien's intent to expose the trauma and psychological damage caused to young women by the Catholic Church's socialisation process of young women in the 1950s (Thompson 2010, 22). O'Brien describes in a persistent way the impact of compulsory motherhood in a context in which the Catholic iconography of the Virgin Mary, the nationalist emblem of Mother Ireland, and the Constitution of the state all intertwine to make motherhood in Ireland a sacred domain for women (*ibidem*, 23). This 'sacred space' for women is usually a repressed and depressed one in O'Brien's stories. Despite the scarcity of love in her stories, O'Brien insisted in one interview that her major concern is with loss as much as with love in her stories: "[l]oss is every child's theme, because by necessity the child loses its mother and its bearings. And writers, however, mature and wise and eminent, are children at heart. So my central theme is loss – loss of love, loss of self, loss of God" (O'Brien 1984a, 38). Indeed, O'Brien admitted that being a writer-in-(self)-exile has helped her psychologically distance herself to the degree neces-

¹ The publication date is the original date for each individual story to be released to the public. "Cords", "A Rose in the Heart" and "Sister Imelda" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1968, 1978 and 1981.

² "The uncanny", *Das Unheimliche* "the opposite of what is familiar" in German, here refers to a Freudian concept which denotes something can be both familiar yet alien, leading to a feeling of such being uncomfortably strange or even terrifying.

sary to be able to write about this preoccupying theme (Eckley 1974, 93-94). A further preoccupation of O'Brien seems to be the residual guilt and shame which stems from the family legacy. For the context and the effect of which, O'Brien's narrative is in effect, according to Balzano, a neuro-narrative in which "the inner landscapes of the brain reflect the narrator's contemporary locus of self-discovery" (2006, 94). O'Brien's scenario reveals the daughter's revulsion and/or resistance towards the mother in an attempt to distance herself from a symbol which signifies conformity and powerlessness. The haunting omniscience of a "demon mother" consumes the essence of the woman/daughter's life; and in effect, simply the presence or even the recollection of this mother reopens an inner wound again and again (Thompson 2010, 22). The woman/daughter is trapped inside her own prison constructed by a guilt and shame incubated in a culture in which she, and also O'Brien herself, was born and bred. Invariably O'Brien's stories tend to depict human relationships entangled in a web of patriarchal doctrines reinforced and endorsed by Catholicism in Ireland. An ambivalence in women's identification process emerges and re-emerges throughout O'Brien's stories, and this ambivalence is itself a likely block to development of a fully-fledged female agency. This essay will concentrate in particular on the ambivalent aspects of the maternal presence in the three Edna O'Brien stories – "Cords", "A Rose in the Heart", "Sister Imelda" – from the perspective the impact which a culturally and socially constructed abjection has upon the process of women's identification and individuality.

2. *A thorny rose in the heart*

A haunting-mother-abjection in particular is evident in O'Brien's "A Rose in the Heart"³. Set in the first half of the twentieth century, this novella narrates a desperate mother-daughter symbiosis represented in a typical O'Brien's microcosm of an old, backward and isolated Irish rural community. O'Brien's women, as those under patriarchy described by Kristeva, tend to build their sense of identity in part around a sense of disgust, abjection, towards femininity. The abjection of mother is, according to Kristeva, inherent in western culture⁴. At a personal level abjection is, as argued by Kristeva in

³ This story, later titled "A Rose in the Heart of New York", was collected in *Mrs. Reinhardt* (1978), *A Rose in the Heart of New York* (1979), *A Fanatic Heart* (1984) and the most recent short story collection *The Love Object* (2013), which bears the same name as the 1968 collection. However, it did not include the story "A Rose in the Heart".

⁴ Another key proponent of French feminism, Luce Irigaray, also observes and argues that western culture is based on the inevitable murder of the mother. Irigaray argues that in classical myths, daughters such as Antigone have to juggle between choices of identifying with the patriarchy's laws and obliterating the mother, or with the mother at the expense of exclusion and self-annihilation. See Irigaray 1991, 36-47.

Powers of Horror (1982), an unconscious repression of infantile impulses, a compulsion to expel those which are unclean and improper, an urge to differentiate and therefore exclude what is Not-I, the *Other*, during the process of individuation⁵. The abjection process is apparently more difficult for women than men due to the fact that what the female subject attempts to reject and expel is in effect part of her 'self', her femininity and sexuality. The female subject cannot abject this Other without, at some level, abjecting herself. Kristeva argues that we constitute our subjectivity in a patriarchal domain, the symbolic order, by exerting the primitive chaotic mass which is associated with the maternal as abject, as well as waste and what we consider to be unclean, useless or even harmful (Coughlan 2006, 176). O'Brien's women often feature such self-loathing and revulsion towards their sexuality which also dictates women's destiny, and consequently, women's daring to transgress the tabooed domain of sexuality is highly punitive in O'Brien's works.

The first female character, the woman/mother, in "A Rose in the Heart" illustrates some characteristics of such an abject woman. Oddly enough, two central female characters in this story, the mother and the daughter, are nameless. There is no trace of personalised identification for these women. O'Brien's heroines in some of her stories are presented with no individualised identity, perhaps mirroring a fragmented reality of female agency (or rather, lack thereof) for Irish women. The setting and background in the story "A Rose in the Heart" is a gloomy one – the cold dark December night (close to Christmastime) in a remote place in rural Ireland. It is supposed to be festive time for family reunion and celebration with warmth of lights, food and laughter, but instead it paints a picture of desolation and despair: the cold, dark rooms inside a "solemn lonesome" house, the rotting smell of apples in the "Vacant Room", and the shadow of previous two tragic deaths of children in the family (O'Brien 1984b, 375). Then the readers are taken into the dark blue room where the story begins. A woman is in excruciating labour while

⁵ The first object a child experiences is usually the person who nurses the child, the pre-oedipal mother, whom a child needs to separate oneself from in order to step into the next stage of development through which a separate identity, termed subjectivity by Kristeva is then created. Since abjection is something that disturbs and threatens the defined boundary, identity and order, this vulnerability of the Self is forever dogged by the uncanny abjected Other. Kristeva argues this step is required to enter into the realm of the Symbolic Order (language) under the Laws of the Father. This inefficient and incomplete attempt to break completely from the primal bodily impulses associated with the maternal are argued by Kristeva as likely both to return to haunt the subject as well as to produce an abject desire to fuse with the Other. This results from a fear of dependence on the mother which threatens the subject with "dissolution and engulfment" (Ingman 2007, 69). This clumsy break from the maternal body runs a risk of falling back "under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (Kristeva 1982, 13). The risk of being taken back to the pre-oedipal state throughout one's life remains perpetual as it is "under way, is never absolutely clear" (Kristeva 2000, 21).

her husband is busy cooking a goose in the kitchen. There is, however, no joy anticipating the coming of the new born from the alcoholic “paralytic” husband and the deeply distressed mother in pain (*ibidem*, 377). The vivid graphic description of a woman’s labour, her “torn flesh that was gaping and coated with blood” is in juxtaposition with a piece of cooked gooseshit her husband “was carrying and remarking on its being unappetizing” (*ibidem*, 378). It is in fact her fourth childbirth and two earlier births had ended in death of the baby. It seems for the woman that this flesh-tearing childbirth is the punishment, rather than reward she receives for her womanhood. This woman, a mother herself, is presented as an abject figure revolted both by her own sexuality and the patriarchy which controls her life. Marina Warner argues that this association of sexuality and punishment and the emphasis on women’s “torn and broken flesh” implies “the psychological obsession of the religion with sexual sin” (Warner 1976, 71). A biblical reference⁶ is suggested through the woman’s childbirth pang and her subjugated role as a wife:

Why be a woman. Oh, cruel life; oh, merciless fate, oh, heartless man, she sobbed.... She had been prized apart, again and again, with not a word to her, not a little endearment, only rammed through and told to open up. When she married she had escaped the life of a serving girl, the possible experience of living in some grim institutions, but as time went on and the bottom drawer was emptied of its gifts, she saw that she was made to serve in an altogether other way. (O’Brien 1984b, 376)

O’Brien emphasizes the mother’s physical experience of pain and injury which, as Amanda Graham argues, is in turn experienced as “the culminating point in a history of sexual degradation” (Graham 1996, 17). The revulsion of the woman in labour is a response, perhaps, more to her own femininity and destiny than to her husband’s unsuccessfully cooked gooseshit, bits of the breast of which was torn off and looked wounded, just like “the woman [herself] upstairs, who was then tightening her heart and soul, tightening inside the array of catgut stitches, and regarding her whole life as a vast disappointment... she was a vehicle for pain and for insult” (O’Brien 1984b, 379). The mother’s own disappointment soon turns to the new-born child. Initially she refuses to give a name to this ugly child she is far from proud of. Furthermore, the woman herself, like her daughter, is never mentioned by a personal name, and the individual identity is blurry and blocked. Perhaps the mother projects onto the child, who is also a girl, a negative memory of her unhappy marriage, the painful birthing

⁶ *Genesis* 3: 16: “Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee”. From the Jewish Virtual Library. Available at <www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bereishit-genesis-full-text> (05/2017).

process as a result of an unpleasant sexual experience and her destiny as a woman (Malpezzi 1996, 356).

Later the mother changes her attitude, turning instead to idolise the child in a strange mystical way:

[The child's] very ugliness disappeared. It seemed to drink them in with its huge, contemplating, slightly hazed-over, navy eyes. They shone at whatever they saw. The mother would look in the direction of the pram and say a little prayer for it, or smile, and often at night she held the candle shielded by her hand to see the face, to say pet or tush, to say nonsense to it. It ate whatever it was given ... The food was what united them, eating off the same plate, using the same spoon, watching one another's chews, feeling the food as it went down the other's neck ... When it ate blancmange or junket, it was eating part of the lovely substance of its mother. (O'Brien 1984b, 380)

The daughter's infantile primary instincts in vision, smell and taste, especially food consumption and satisfaction of physical hunger, are closely associated with emotional ties to the mother. The daughter's starvation for the mother's emotions is presented through depictions of mother's feeding and sharing food with her, of the smell of her mother's makeup, of her mother's clothes and of her presence. Here in particular the routine of food sharing between the mother and the daughter is almost performed like a kind of mystical religious ritual. The rite of celebrating the sharing of bread and wine in Christianity commemorates the passion of Christ, offering to share his flesh and blood with those who belong to him. In this story there is an analogous passion, that of the mother's martyr-like suffering in agonising childbirth, offering her body and flesh to be burst apart for the coming of the child, and later she sacrifices to save everything for the child (eggs for breakfast, tuition fee for a boarding school, a small gift food parcel from a tight-budget home). The mother feeds and fills the child with food as well as her love, "the lovely substances" of her. The child, at one point, shows her fear of losing the mother by rejecting food from other people while her mother is away. When her mother eventually returns home, the mother and the daughter reunite by baking a cake and eating together – "she [the daughter] never tasted anything so wonderful in all her life" (*ibidem*, 384). Here the mother and the child always seem to connect through a sort of food-feeding ceremony. The child seems to immerse herself in a state of oneness with the mother, a state of chora⁷, in which she finds "[h]er mother's knuckles were her knuckles, her mother's veins were her veins, her mother's lap was a second heaven, her mother's forehead a copybook onto which she traced A B C D, her mother's body was a recess that she would wander inside forever

⁷ Before any abjection process, the infant is immersed in a state which Kristeva terms chora, a "non-spatial, non-temporal receptacle of drives where being is undifferentiated" (Ingman 2007, 69).

and ever, a sepulcher growing deeper and deeper" (*ibidem*, 380). They are inseparable in a harmony of oneness.

Nevertheless, this emotional dependence on the mother, in Kristeva's theory, is somehow also damaging for the daughter by blocking her progress towards individuation. The daughter has no friends and she does not need any because her cup is full. Her mother is "the cup", the holy grail, to her but subconsciously she also fears and imagines her mother "a gigantic sponge, a habitation in which she long[s] to sink", and yet simultaneously, is afraid to be choked and drown (*ibidem*, 388). In fact, the daughter's subsequent desperate separation from the mother is a painful procedure. The perpetual, clumsy, break with the maternal body from its pre-oedipal period is tragic for this daughter. She feels she "was being milked emotionally" starting to fear she would be consumed metaphorically by this abject mother (O'Brien 1984b, 399). This fear is clearly manifested in one of the daughter's dreams in which she attempts to murder the mother in order to terminate the mother's suffocation of her. Kristeva argues that women's individuation is always painful and negative because it is difficult not to evoke a self-disgust towards herself during the process. In the daughter's matricidal dream, she soon realises what she has tried to do to the mother is self-destructive because she is in turn abjecting/expelling part of herself, which is exactly "this little insect that [she's] trying to kill" (*ibidem*, 394). The break with the mother proves to be bleak and hopeless for this daughter. The daughter may never escape from the impact of this clumsy break from the mother even after the mother's death.

At the end of the story the daughter returns to the family house for her mother's funeral. At the chapel where her mother's coffin is kept she experiences something uncanny. "It was unfinished", the fingers and mouth of the corpse seem to move and one eyelid is not fully shut as if her mother "is not dead, she has merely visited the other world" (*ibidem*, 403). The "signs of horror", as explained by Kristeva, involve revulsion and abjection against bodily waste (in this case the mother's corpse) and the death taboo represents anxiety about the threat to identity due to its transgression across defined/undefined boundaries (Kristeva 1982, 65-69; Rooks-Hughes 1996, 90). The fear of being haunted by the mother is expressed by the feeling that the connection between them is "unfinished", just as her corpse which was once human and now non-human evokes a horror involving the dead's invading the space of the living (Malcolm, Malcolm 2008, 438). Her mother's corporeal death does not break the spell on her, and she is forever haunted by the ghost of this demonic mother. After the mother's death, the daughter is disappointed to discover that the only souvenir left to her by her mother is money instead of anything personal which might assist in the process of final closure. The daughter is trapped in a world starved of love, which also drowns her. The daughter's unsuccessful separation from the mother, or rather her being abandoned by the mother, has built yet another prison for

her, who is walled in a house of silence as if it has “died or [has] been carefully put down to sleep” (O’Brien 1984b, 404). This solemn lonesome family house becomes once more a desolate abyss of desperation. The ultimate silence is, in fact, death. The story ends in the daughter’s total desperation without the hope of being saved.

3. *The twisted cords*

Published a decade before “A Rose in the Heart”, O’Brien’s “Cords” narrates a young woman writer exiled in London where she pursues a “sinful life” disapproved of by her mother, the circumstance of which is strikingly similar to that of O’Brien herself who also left home to start a new life in London where she started to write around the age of late twenties. Published at an interval of ten years, O’Brien’s “Cords” and “A Rose in the Heart” seem to represent a reverse sequel of a typical O’Brien mother-daughter scenario⁸. O’Brien’s archetypal uncanny devouring mother in “Cords” reappears in “A Rose in the Heart” with much more detail about the suffering of the mother, her bond with the daughter and her ultimate end of life. O’Brien’s characteristic anonymity of characters in her works also features in “Cords”, one of her earlier stories produced in the late 1960s. In “Cords”, only one of the two central characters, the daughter Claire, is clearly named. All other characters, including her mother, her father, her lovers, her Bohemian friends, remain ‘faceless’ in the story. The nameless mother in particular, a devoted, strong-willed yet sacrificial, subservient Irish wife and mother, now is a characteristic motif in O’Brien’s work. The story title of “Cords” implies “invisible strings” attaching the mother and the daughter to each other. This may also recall a first string connecting mother and daughter, the biological one – the umbilical cord which connects foetus and placenta, and provides nutrition from the maternal body. In the story, invisible “Cords” which seem to bind closely the mother and the daughter might also imply a net, a stifling trap in which love is displaced by pain and suffering. The daughter fears that she may in some way replicate her mother’s destiny. The cords of destiny, like the omnipotent mother, are terrifying. This daughter vigorously fends off her mother whom she perceives as a source of disempowerment due to the mother’s hopelessly subjugated life, a common theme in O’Brien’s as well as other modern Irish women’s mother-daughter stories.

⁸ The characters and storyline of “Cords” and “A Rose in the Heart” in many ways mirror some of the true events of in O’Brien’s life, whose mother also had worked as a maid in New York just like the one in “A Rose in the Heart” as well as being loving but controlling as the one in “Cords” and “A Rose in the Heart”.

This daughter in "Cords" may also be read as one who suffers from what André Green has termed "the dead mother complex", which Helen Thompson has suggested to be a typical O'Brien Irish mother-daughter motif (Thompson 2010, 33). The notion of the "dead mother complex", originally a pathological term for a psychotic disorder used by the French psychoanalyst André Green, refers to an infantile depression in which the mother is self-absorbed as a result of a loss, in other words, is emotionally dead⁹. The victim then has "acute conflicts with those who are close" and suffers from a lack of capacity to love (Green 1986, 149). The victim compensates for this wound in various ways, such as turning to "intense intellectual activity" or "artistic creation" (*ibidem*, 160; Doane, Hodges 1992, 58). The "dead mother" is not quite dead, according to Green, she has "enormous, if not monstrous power", consequently, the child "takes measures to 'bury her alive' so that [the mother] remains in the child's psyche as a 'cold core', a 'black' void associated with mourning" (Green 1986, 146, 150; Doane, Hodges 1992, 58). The victim/subject (child) never seems to shake off the omnipotence of the emotionally dead mother and is unable to withdraw emotionally from the resultant trauma. This sense of being in loss may be related also to the feeling of abjection which Kristeva regarded as referring to a state of having "lost or never to have found the belief in one's own existence or being" (Buren 2007, 24). The daughter in "Cords" appears to suffer a trauma resulting from memories of childhood associating with an abusive father and a powerless, also emotionally dead, mother in this respect.

In "Cords", once again, the daughter demonstrates signs of a self-object figure like many characters in O'Brien's stories. They tend to suffer disastrous relationships, and undergo extreme fear and anxiety throughout their lives, perhaps because the wound/trauma from a terrifying experience in their childhood is never fully healed. Readers are slowly introduced to the story through fragments of flashbacks from the daughter's buried memory revealing a dismal past associated with her mother and home in rural Ireland. Despite the daughter's contempt for her past, she cannot help letting herself be taken back again and again to relive the nightmarish moments. The story starts with a seemingly promising, warm reunion of the mother and the daughter after one year without contact between them. The setting is not in local, ru-

⁹ The mother, as André Green argues, is not physically dead but is not emotionally available due to her own bereavement. The child experiences this self-absorption as a catastrophe, a wound from which the child develops negative 'primary narcissism' connected with feelings of emptiness (Doane, Hodges 1992, 58). This feeling of emptiness "carries in its wake, beside the loss of love, the loss of meaning" as if the dead object (mother) draws the child toward a "deathly, deserted universe" (Green 1986, 150, 167). According to Freud's definition, primary narcissism is the "exclusive self-love", the "libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation". For more see Freud 1914, Green 1986, Doane, Hodges 1992.

ral Ireland but cosmopolitan England. The story starts by painting a picture of two contrasting worlds, physically and mentally, which have already separated them. The daughter, Claire, has run away from her mother's world and her past to dwell in a way which her mother belittles as being wicked and sinful. Claire has, from the mother's point of view, lost her path, and "[become] different: she[']s lost her faith, and she [mixes] with queer people and [writes] poems" in which one could "detect the sin" and they "seemed more wicked" (O'Brien 1970, 115). The artistic creation is seen by the mother as a deviant libidinal force which the mother is clearly devoid of. This creative force, is considered by Green to be a compensation for a child's loss of love. On the surface, Claire as a writer/artist seems to lead a glamorous life in a big city. Underneath the glossy veneer of Claire's life, however, she always seems to be disturbed by an unknown fear resulting in a sense of insecurity and obsessive traits. Perhaps deep down Claire never escapes the ghost of her past. To make things worse, the presence of the mother makes concrete and real all the buried darkness – "[s]ince her mother's arrival every detail of her childhood kept dogging her. Her present life, her work, the friends she had, seemed insubstantial compared with all that had happened before" (*ibidem*, 126). O'Brien does not give away direct clues about Claire's past but fragments in her flashback reveal Claire clearly suffers from a kind of emotional starvation which never seems to be quenched in her life.

Claire's failed relationships and constant (almost compulsive) brief, shallow social acquaintances suggest an inability to be intimate and to love. This impotence in love, as Green has argued, may be a tell-tale sign of a wounded mind from childhood. Claire as a child had to experience trauma on various levels: avoiding abuse by her violent alcoholic father and being scapegoated, surviving the hardship of poverty and the destructive impact of one crisis after another. Her fear is encapsulated in a flash of memory associating with her mother's low and dramatic voice in a crisis like an alarming siren. The mother is preoccupied with her own suffering. She is convinced "[she] was a good mother. [She] did everything [she] could" (*ibidem*, 125)¹⁰. Claire is apparently trapped in a "black void", a space in which soft feelings are replaced by mourning associated with mother. It seems there is "no one she [trusts]", and she always frightens men away by recalling "the treacherous way the lovers vanished" (*ibidem*, 124-145). A depressing instead of joyful portrait of a mother-daughter interaction is presented throughout the story; for example, the mother sees a daughter "who'd changed, become moody", while Claire focuses on mere "seconds of tenderness",

¹⁰ Although there is no clue to suspect that Claire has been sexually abused by the father, Edna O'Brien frequently depicts a dysfunctional Irish family with an absent, invalid, often alcoholic and controlling father in her stories. O'Brien's daughters often blame their mothers for not doing enough to protect them from the demon father.

“crushing silences”, her mother’s appearance of “a tombstone, chalk white and *dead* still [emphasis mine]”, her mother’s “old, twisted, bitter” face (*ibidem*, 116–126). The peculiar lack of deep emotions and intimacy is apparent in Claire’s relationship with people including her mother and vice versa. The mother at first appears to be a loving, caring old-fashioned countrywoman. She brought her daughter a taste of home – food and souvenirs handmade by her. Similarly her daughter also tries hard to please her mother by providing food which is to her mother’s taste if not hers – “these foods she herself found distasteful” (*ibidem*, 117). However, the initial intimacy between the mother and daughter is short-lived. Soon enough the daughter’s perception of her mother’s judgemental remarks and criticism about her sinful life trigger in the daughter a state of abjection due to a sense of internalised shame. Even when the mother refrains from mentioning the past, in fact the mother is reliving ‘the past’ through sharing pain apparently the only commonality remaining between them and the only basis on which they can share communication. This mother herself, to the daughter, signifies pain, suffering and darkness. One incident in the story reveals a clue about Claire’s phobia, that is, her unspeakable fear of the colour red. This daughter recalls that once she had to suck up the blood from her cut fingers injured by a laser blade on a shelf¹¹. The colour, clearly associated with blood and pain, reminds her of her vulnerability as a child: “she would suddenly panic and cry out convinced that her sweat became as drops of blood. She put her hands through the flaps and begged the masseuse to protect her, the way she had begged her mother, long ago” (*ibidem*, 127). The mother may or may not have responded to her, but perhaps the mother was not always available in time or did not react effectively enough when Claire was in need. Sharing the mother’s pain, such as a disturbing description of the toe operation from the mother, seems to be all that is left for Claire to take from her mother. The story ends by the mother insisting on an early departure from her visit. The point of separation seems to bring relief to both. However, the invisible cords of the past, binding them together on the basis of shared pain and trauma, seem unlikely ever to be released.

4. *The surrogate love object*

One of O’Brien’s most controversial stories, “Sister Imelda”, appears to evoke a motif of the uncanny state of oneness with a primordial maternal entity, an immersion into a state of *jouissance*, a Kristevan term referring to

¹¹ This event strangely reappears in “A Rose in the Heart” in which O’Brien contrasts this distressed wounded girl Claire in “Cords” with the one showered in maternal love in “A Rose in the Heart” in which the mother sucks the child’s cut fingers “to lessen the pain and licked to abolish the blood and kept saying soft things until the child was stilled again” (O’Brien 1984b, 380).

bodily pleasure in *chora*, the period when mother-infant bond and closeness is established. Notwithstanding, “Sister Imelda” presents us with an enigmatic, mother-like figure, combined with religious mysticism and, perhaps, a hint of sexual ambiguity, or a seduction of a kind of sublimated erotic and maternal love in her relationship with the girl in the story. This story has certainly aroused a great deal of interest among critics concerning another dimension – traces of sexual attraction between women¹². O’Brien may describe a general fact of life in a convent school during that time in Ireland. O’Brien’s interest in writing about an ambivalent and ambiguous, sometimes even troubled, relationship between women from different generations prevail in this story as in other of her works. “Sister Imelda” may be read as one of O’Brien’s more ambiguous texts in which she deals with the repressed desire of the daughter for the mother within a buried female/maternal terrain. The repression of the maternal refers to the experience in which the familiar becomes uncanny as a result of “the effacement of separation and the realization of desire... the deep primeval desire to go back to the womb” (Balzano 2006, 101). The narrator in “Sister Imelda” is not blood related to this nun Imelda, yet she develops a daughter-like idolisation and idealisation of this maternal figure which recalls this unspoken identification with a preoedipal desire for the mother. Mary Vicinus suggests that in a boarding school environment, age difference in the teacher-student relationship plays a crucial role for both parties in enhancing a “anticipatory pleasure”, a “maternal and erotic love subsumed under religious duty” (Vicinus 1984, 605; Thompson 2010, 158). This “maternal erotic love”, reliance in Kristeva’s term¹³, denotes a maternal passion as well as vocation (Kristeva 2014, 72).

The setting in “Sister Imelda” is an isolated prison-like space — a convent school which seems to be a standard part of O’Brien’s topographical repertoire in her works. The emblematic psychological prison and exile-like life (away from home), which O’Brien herself experienced so deeply as a writer whose work was once banned in Ireland, appear to reemerge in many of her works. The noticeable “preoccupation with guilt and shame” throughout

¹² Neither having denied nor admitted her intention in the story, O’Brien own interesting comment in a 1996 interview was: “almost every girl who goes to a convent falls in love with a nun and wants to be a nun” (Pearce 1996, 7). The main character, also the narrator of the story “Sister Imelda”, is described to be “too dotty or naive to conceal [her] sexual feelings [for Sister Imelda]” (Moynahan 1985, 34). It demonstrates “slight bewilderment and no overtones of adult knowingness” (Glendinning 1982, 456). It is questionable if the narrator’s feelings are “illicit and sublimated” (Maitland 1982, 25). For further see Glendinning 1982, 456; Maitland 1982, 25-26; Moynahan 1985, 34.

¹³ This term, according to Julia Kristeva, refers to a kind of “maternal eroticism”, a state of urgency of life energy which translates the libidinal forces into a capacity to maternal tenderness (Kristeva 2014, 72).

her works reappear in several of O'Brien's stories including "Sister Imelda" (Balzano 2006, 94). In "Sister Imelda", the central, yet once again nameless, character narrates a story from her own first-person point of view regarding her "locked up" life in a convent and her encounter with the nun, known as Sister Imelda (O'Brien 1984b, 137). She paints a picture of a milieu in which a group of young, naive, inexperienced women are being educated by a rigid sect of older women to exert strict control over repressed emotions and desires in conformity with a specific religious doctrine. This walled-in enclosure of nuns in a womb-like convent school is in the foreground of the story which describes "its high stone wall and green iron gate enfolding us again, [it] seemed more of a prison than ever... and my friend Baba and I [the narrator] were dreaming of our final escape, which would be in a year... Convents were dungeons and no doubt about it" (*ibidem*, 124, 134). Teachers and pupils in the convent function like a family unit, and also refer to one another as family such as Mother or Sister yet without the intimacy of personal emotions and feelings which are inherent in the typical nuclear family unit. The convent schoolgirls in "Sister Imelda" must not "give way to tears" and are forbidden to let out cries when washing in cold water at night since "baths [are] immoral [and forbidden]" (*ibidem*, 136, 138).

The focus of the narration soon switches to the girl and her mystical intimacy of her friendly relationship with a young nun, Sister Imelda, who had just joined the convent. A sense of ambiguous emotion, passion, pleasure, mixed with a sense of dread and ultimate loss, runs through the text. The narrator defers to two essential female role models in her school life – Sister Imelda and her friend Baba. They appear to represent contrasting yet not mutually exclusive role models for this girl in the story. The nun, a symbolic bride of Christ, and a replica of an idolised and idealised mother figure, the Virgin Mary, leads a life "unspotted by sin" (O'Brien 1984b, 125). Yet Sister Imelda in some way subverts the cliché of what a nun may be expected to represent. Unlike the other emotionally remote and aloof nuns in the convent, Sister Imelda's eyes are certainly different, "full of verve", there is her more bouncy walk, she shows "more excitement in the way she tackled teaching" (*ibidem*, 124-125). Compared to her friend Baba whose bolder, wilder nature may be categorised as that of a secular sinner, by contrast Sister Imelda's seeming austerity in food, emotions and pleasure of all sorts becomes elevated for the narrator to a mysterious terrain of attraction which implies both thrill and pleasure. The girl is both attracted to and thrilled by the nun when they share a secret moment together, or exchange gifts, and this combines with the nun's very human demeanor when she reveals her impulsiveness (her rumoured fierce temper), her recklessness such as when she broke off a chrysanthemum for the girl to smell, her manner of holding chalk like a cigarette and the way she "[sat] on the edge of the table swaying her legs. There was something reckless about her pose, something defiant",

as opposed to a image of humility, one of the celestial virtues (*ibidem*, 129). The girl, who is far away from her mother and home, sees the nun Imelda as a surrogate love object bringing back an infantile sense of security and satisfaction which has been always provided by the closeness of a bond with the maternal entity. This mysterious Heimisch infantile connection seems to be uncannily hinted in the first gift from the nun to the girl showing a picture of “a mother looking down on the infant child” (*ibidem*, 128).

Sister Imelda is introduced to the girl, and readers as a figure of mystery with an unknown past but retaining a few traits of her once secular existence in the world into which the girl is initially eager to step. Soon the girl changes her wishes and decides to follow the vocation of a nun, following in the footsteps of her idolised mother Imelda. It is not unusual for a child to attempt to copy what a mother does. The girl even tries “as accurately as possible to imitate her [Imelda’s] handwriting” (*ibidem*, 135). However, the price of following this mother’s step may be a huge one, in this case, permanent repression of individual freedom and emotions. It is also possible the girl regards Imelda as her secretly idealised surrogate mother whose underlying unorthodoxy of mannerism and behaviour can even be regarded as rebellious and subversive by comparison to the girl’s own mother who is subservient to an ill-tempered father back home. What the girl observes and rejects is a submissive role of Eve as she sees in her own mother, and by contrast, this surrogate mother Imelda is the “antagonistic, energetic form of Lilith” (Balzano 2006, 103)¹⁴. However, the paradox lies in the fact that what the girl attempts to reject and forget is what she also secretly, subconsciously desires or furthermore, what she simply cannot turn her back on; that is, the yearning, a repressed desire to return to the maternal. Imelda’s pastry and the smell of baking in the kitchen bring the girl back to a familiar place – home, the mother to be exact, despite her rebellious thoughts to reject the latter and all she represents: “I wonder if she had supplanted my mother, and I hoped not, because I had aimed to outstep my original world and take my place in a new and hallowed one” (O’Brien 1984b, 130). Nevertheless, the girl wishes to be free from her mother and home and instead finds a surrogate within the convent. What’s more, the girl still cannot escape ultimate submission and repression if she follows the nun’s conformed, desexualised life. It seems under patriarchy, whether it is in or outside the family and the church, a woman’s prescribed role as wife and mother is inevitable and inescapable: “[l]ife was geared to work and to meeting men, and yet one knew that mating could only lead to one’s being a mother and hawking obstreperous children out to the seaside on Sunday” (*ibidem*, 142).

¹⁴ Lilith, Adam’s first wife, is the demon and goddess according to Talmudic tradition and legend. Refusing to be considered his inferior, Lilith left him and was consequently expelled from Eden. For more see Hurwitz 1980.

The depictions of the nuns in the convent and Sister Imelda are peculiarly presented in paradoxical, even blasphemous images ironically at odds with their sacred vocation. The nuns, Sister Imelda among them, are described to emerge from their cells into a chanting prayer room “like ravens, to fling themselves on the tiled floor of the chapel” (*ibidem*, 131). The raven simile here not only describes the black gown of these nuns but may also symbolise stagnation and death¹⁵. Moreover, it is even suggested that Imelda may be identified as a Luciferian figure, a light-bearer, in the story in which the girl gave Imelda a flash lamp as a gift to express her love (Balzano 2006, 98). Apparently Sister Imelda’s familiarity with smoking and her interest in cookery makes her at ease near fire, and she “must have liked cookery class, because she beamed and called to someone, anyone, to get up to a blazing fire... It was hot, because her spit *rose up and sizzled*” (O’Brien 1984b, 129; emphasis mine). The image of such evokes a room with a red hot stove and heat, possibly also an allusion to the infernal flames of hell¹⁶. Then comes an odd scene in which the nun indulges in the pleasure of feeding the girl sweet tarts. Feeding as well as the association with food is the primal pleasure in which a child forms a bond with its mother during the *chora*¹⁷. Sister Imelda seems to enjoy this motherly bonding experience through the act of feeding the girl: “she watched me eat as if she herself derived some peculiar pleasure from it... She was amused” (*ibidem*, 130).

The association of food with emotion between the nun and girl is a recurring theme throughout the story. This association is also a metaphor for the living conditions in the convent. In the convent, “food [is] the source of the greatest grumbles”, and the girl suspects the nun is “overmortified herself by not eating at all” (*ibidem*, 125-126). The girl’s friend Baba gorges the remaining tart and get jealous about how the nun favours the girl. The food satisfaction is scarce in the convent, therefore, on holidays back home, the girl indulges herself in food-based self-gratification. The nun later seems to distance herself from the girl by turning down her offering of an iced queen cake. When the girl tries hard to subdue her tears in this situation out of

¹⁵ Ravens, according to Carl Jung, is a symbol of dark side, an inner self, of psychology. In Norse myths, the Valkyries are said to ride as ravens to claim souls from the dead bodies in a battlefield. There is a similar description about the war goddesses Morrígons (the phantom queens) in Irish mythology, who appear in a form of ravens at the battlefield. It may be not foreign to connect the ravens with the mystical unknown (such as death) due to raven’s high intelligence as well as their role as scavengers consuming flesh from dead bodies. The raven’s cackle utterance “*cras cras*” was compared to a sound in Latin referring to “tomorrow”. For Jung’s exploration on symbols and archetypes, see Jung 1969.

¹⁶ The most impressive literary work which presents a vivid photographic description about Hell perhaps is Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy* in which depicts the heretics are sent to a fire punishment in hell.

¹⁷ The warmth of body heat, the heartbeat, soft skin touch, mother’s milk and fluids (such as tears) are all mixed up in a child’s primordial impulses of oneness with its creator/mother.

fear of revealing her emotion for the nun in public, she left a cup of milk untouched. Milk is, certainly, the substance which has the most direct association with feeding and the maternal. After the girl gives the nun some bananas as a gift of condolence for a personal tragedy involving the nun's brother, she receives an orange from the nun in return. Oranges, as well as the colour orange, resemble the colour of fire and light, and can take on various positive as well as negative symbolic associations such as the cardinal sin of 'gluttony', and thus may be another metaphor relating to the characters' preoccupation with the nexus between food and emotion in this story¹⁸. The vice of gluttony (*gula*) refers to an act of overindulgence which may also indicate the choices these young girls (the narrator and Baba) might be tempted to make in their life. In the last scene the narrator is horrified to see Sister Imelda again on a busy bus. Imelda's presence brings back the girl's guilt about how she broke her promise to Imelda. She, now a college student, is on her way with Baba to meet men in Howth. She admits putting on too much makeup for which "even the conductor seemed to disapprove" and tries to wipe off the lipstick out of shame when she has a glimpse of the nun on the bus (*ibidem*, 142). The girl is about to make a journey, far away from a way of life of austerity but one which has potential to lead to indulgence, especially in sexual desire. The ties with this surrogate mother are doomed. They were not "fully realised" in the past and will never be in the future (*ibidem*, 143).

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated a perspective to review the over-glorified yet problematic motherhood in three Edna O'Brien's mother-daughter stories. This sublimated form of womanhood is in particular presented in a culture defined by patriarchy and Catholicism. The mother in the story, just like the homeland to the exiled writer, still has monstrous power in every way upon the woman/daughter who is so desperate to escape the suffocating environment and the fate which befell her mother. O'Brien's melancholy women/daughters remain blocked at the threshold of the social arena in which they seek compensation for lost communion with their mothers, and yet, trapped in a kind of emotional no man's land, have to pay the price for "romantic dreams of oneness premised on an unmediated, and thus deadly, maternal union" (Summers-Bremner 2010, 3). This uncanny maternal figure, powerless yet devouring, appears to manifest herself in various aspects displaying a terrifying and tantalisingly seductive power on the younger woman/daughter in O'Brien's stories. Typically, O'Brien's daughter tends to turn into a self-object

¹⁸ For more colour and food association with religious cardinal sins see Soza 2009; Touissaint-Samat 2009.

figure burdened with guilt and shame incubated from society, the dominant culture of which stresses repentance and abjection under patriarchy.

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